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ABSTRACT

Theorists and researchers have developed abstract divisions in the life span to mark significant stages. To explore the conceptual labels individuals use to make divisions in their life spans, 92 adults, aged 20 to 55 years, marked significant milestones on a lifeline. Participants also completed a demographic questionnaire. Data on the labels used and the frequency of responses were tallied. An analysis of the results showed that subjects did not employ the age periods or conceptual stages derived by researchers but instead used events or milestones that fell into four social categories: school, marriage, children, and career/jobs. Subjects used significantly more milestones from their past than their future. The age of the respondent was not reflected in the number of milestones used but rather in the distribution between past and future. These findings suggest that the subject's perspective may be useful in understanding changes in adulthood. (BL)

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Self-perceived Milestones in Aging

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Abstract

This study explores the spontaneous markers individuals use to conceptualize their life. Adults ranging in age from 20 to 55 were given the task of regarding their life as a whole and marking off any perceived processes or milestones that seemed to divide it into segments--from birth to present and present to death. All but three subjects chose not to use age periods or conceptual stages derived by researchers but instead used events or milestones. The age of the respondent was not reflected in the number of milestones used but in their distribution between past and future. Usefulness of the subject's perspective for understanding changes in adulthood is discussed.

Self-perceived Milestones in Aging

Introduction

The present study explores the conceptual labels individuals use to make divisions in their life spans. Theorists and researchers such as Freud (1953), Erikson (1959), Bühler (1968), Jung (1933), Piaget (Flavell, 1963), Levinson (1978), Vander Zanden (1981) have developed abstract divisions in the life span based on various types of data. This study seeks to contrast and expand these divisions through investigating the demarkations used by subjects to divide their lifeline. As Myerhoff (1978) points out "we are rarely presented with the views of (old) people about themselves and given the opportunity to hear how aging is experienced by them 'from inside the native's head', so to speak" (p. 251).

There are many indications that individuals make implicit or explicit divisions in their life span. Neugarten (Neugarten & Hagestand, 1976) has pointed out that each of us carries around a biological clock marked off in socially relevant units by which we measure our development as "on" or "off" time. Similarly, Bortner (1978-79) has introduced the idea of "expected life history" to cover the scenario which "most adults implicitly or explicitly carry around in their heads." Kimmel (1980) suggests that "when we think of the life cycle we mark it off with developmental milestones and, in fact, often celebrate these milestones (such as graduation, marriage or retirement)" (p. 4).

The exploration of subject-created divisions in life span has been pursued by Progoff (1975), Sangiuliano (1978), and retirement planning seminars created by Action for Independent Maturity (AIM). In each case the subject is asked to draw a line--a lifeline--and mark off meaningful events or accomplishments; in two of the three instances the number of divisions is specified. The information generated is used by the individual to understand his or her own development.

With such studies as impetus, the present study examines the types and distribution of labels used by subjects to mark their lifeline and relates them to the variables of age, sex, marital status, number of children, and career.

Method

The participants in this study consisted of 92 upper division students (15 males, 77 females) at California State University, Hayward, California. Their ages ranged from 20 to 55, with a mean age of 28.9 and a standard deviation of 10.2 years.

The subjects were asked to draw a line (the direction was unspecified), labeling one end birth and the other end death. Next, they were told to mark off where they were on that lifeline. Following this they were asked: (a) to regard their life from birth to the present and consider whether it seemed to be comprised of periods or milestones or whether it seemed to all flow together; (b) to label any periods, processes or events (if perceived) that separated the segments; (c) to regard their life from the present

to death and consider whether it seemed to be comprised of periods, processes or milestones, and (d) to label these future events or milestones (if perceived).

This task took about 10 to 20 minutes.

The participants then filled out a questionnaire which asked about their sex, age, whether married/formerly married/never married, number of children, whether employed full/part time or not at all, and the (self defined) socioeconomic class of themselves and their parents.

Results and Analyses

The data consisted of the labels the subjects used to mark off events or segments of their lifeline. The number of labels used in the past and future were tallied. The labels themselves were then examined and categorized by frequency of response.

The data were examined in light of three questions: (a) how did the subjects' labels of their life span relate to divisions used by researchers or textbook authors, (b) how were the labels distributed in terms of a person's past and future, (c) were the number or types of labels used related to a subject's age.

Examining the types of label used, it is clear that subjects did not employ those divisions used in textbooks on human development, nor those used by theorists. Only three subjects of 92 used textbook labels. The labels elicited by this technique centered school, marriage, children, and career. Of the 858 labels used, a significant majority, 532 (62%) fell into four categories--

school, marriage, children and career/jobs (Chi Square = 49.46, with df = 1, $p < .001$). The remaining labels (38%) were diverse and could not be grouped into categories. Examples of such labels were death of a parent, building a house, sickness, injury, travel, relocation, birth of a sibling; these events while not uncommon, were used by only one or two individuals in the sample. Most subjects used a combination of frequently used labels and unique labels. Only six out of the total 92 subjects used only labels that were unique to themselves.

Looking more closely at the 86 subjects who used the four frequent label categories, school was the most commonly used marker (86%), marriage was next (74%), then children (63%), and finally career/jobs (62%).

Using marriage as a marker significantly varied with one's marital status (Chi Square = 14.19, with df = 2, $p < .001$). Of those who were married, 88% saw marriage as a milestone. If formerly married, the percentage dropped to 69%, if never married, 65%.

The use of children as a marker also varied significantly with one's parental status (Chi Square = 6.38, with df = 1, $p < .02$). Of those women having children, 81% used them as labels on their lifeline; 53% of childless subjects used children as markers in their future. Men who had children did not use them as labels.

Examining the distribution of labels in relation to past and future through use of a t-test for matched pairs, it was found that subjects used significantly more milestones in their past than their future $\bar{X}_p = 5.34$, $\bar{X}_f = 3.98$, $t = 2.96$, $df = 91$, $p < .01$). The more

labels an individual used in his/her past, the more they tended to use in the future ($r = .21, \alpha < .01$). With increasing age, subjects used more labels in the past ($r = .29, \alpha < .001$) and fewer in the future ($r = .17, \alpha < .04$).

There was no relation between age and number of frequently used labels or unique labels used. Nor was there any significant difference in the number of frequently used labels that fell into the past as compared with the future. However, there was a significant difference for unique labels. Significantly fewer of these were used in the future ($t = 3.99$, $df = 91$, $p < .001$, two tail test).

The majority of the subjects in the sample (77%) considered themselves middle class and this variable was not correlated with either the number or type of labels used.

Discussion

The spontaneous labels that subjects used to conceptualize their lifelines focussed mainly on those elements upon which stage theories have been built--marriage, children and career--or as Freud put it "leiben und arbeiten." People do understand Sheehy's (1976) stages of adulthood; the popularity of her book testifies to its wide appeal. However, this study suggests that subjects do not use generalized stages but rather milestones--socially shared events or processes to mark off their past and future.

The distribution of the milestones in this study between past and future was seemingly in accord with common sense. People used more labels in general, and more unique labels specifically, in

their past than their future: the future seems vague, changeable, uncertain, and less differentiated, whereas the past has been lived. With increasing years, more labels are used in the past and fewer in the future: there is less and less future. The total number of labels used seems to be related to a cognitive style (using more in the past, was related to using more in the future) than to ones' chronological age.

Due to the small number of men in the sample, examining sex differences in the types and number of labels used was not possible. However, it might be assumed that men might use more career related labels and women more marriage/child labels, even if both were employed full time (Stewart, 1976; Kuhlen, 1968). An indication in the present data of possible differences was reflected in the lack of use of children as life markers by men who were fathers and prevalent use by women who were mothers (81%).

Understanding how people conceptualize their life span using lifelines may offer a new technique to explore the direction of change for stages in adulthood. Neugarten (1979) believes we are moving toward an "age-irrelevant society" where the "psychological themes and preoccupations reported by young, middle-aged and older persons seem to be recurrent, appearing and reappearing in new forms rather than following a single, fixed order."

Several studies in the literature (Lehr, 1980; Runyon, 1980; Notman, 1978; Nowicki, 1978; Woods & Witte, 1981) suggest that sex differences as well as external circumstances must be taken into account, all making the possibility of one stable stage theory

for adults a very complicated matter.

Gergen (1980) has pointed out the inability of life span developmental theory to enhance prediction and control. This has led him to propose new criteria for developmental theories: intelligibility and communicability of one's experience. This study's emphasis on the subject's point of view is in line with Gergen's stance since the labels the subject uses to demarkate his/her lifeline are intelligible to him/her and communicate in his/her own words their experience of living.

Brim (Brim & Ryff, 1980) has suggested another possible way of sorting the labels used by subjects in this investigation. Brim proposes a topology of life events which he sees as an integral part of understanding the life span. An event may be typed as social, physical or biological and characterized by its age related-nexx, likelihood of occurrence and social distribution. His approach however, does not amplify the subject's perspective. It would seem to collapse the data into mainly one or two cells (e.g., social, age related, likely to occur, widely distributed) and thus not much would be added to the analysis of the data. Further, determination of the category and type of event is not always easy as there are population variations as well as category overlaps for many events (e.g., injury, birth of a child).

In light of the "age-irrelevant" society many adults may now be living in, it would seem more useful to focus on individual's conceptions of their life span than on trying to establish single, fixed order stages of adulthood. The findings of this study suggest

that the subject's perspective, would at the very least, offer an emphasis on more relevant units-milestones to describe the changing experience of adulthood.

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